

SURINAME 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; both the constitution and the penal code prohibit discrimination based on religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice. Religious groups seeking financial support from the government must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Limited government financial support remained available, primarily as a stipend for clergy. The government continued to pay wages for teachers managed by religious organizations; however, its other designated subsidies for operational expenses of these schools were either late or not paid. To cover the budgetary shortfall, schools managed by religious organizations introduced a school fee for the 2018-19 school year. In September President Desire Delano Bouterse reinforced the commitment of the government to religious freedom in a public speech honoring the U.S. Ambassador.

The Inter-Religious Council (IRIS), an organization of the country's different religious groups, including two Hindu and two Muslim groups, the Jewish community, and the Catholic Church, continued to discuss planned interfaith activities and positions on government policies and their impact on society. The IRIS collaborated with nonmember religious organizations on efforts to promote religious freedom. In October, as part of an interfaith effort to promote respect for the country's religious diversity, IRIS, the Committee for Christian Churches (CCK), and various tribal leaders and dignitaries took part in a conference hosted by the Cultural Center of the Islamic Association in Suriname (SIV). Islamic associations issued condemnations in response to a terror threat posted on Facebook in May in the name of ISIS, calling for respect for each other's religion and ethnicity.

Embassy officials continued to highlight U.S. government policy on the importance of protecting religious freedom and tolerance in meetings with government officials. The Ambassador wrote an op-ed article in a local newspaper in January in honor of Religious Freedom Day highlighting the importance of religious freedom in democracies. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian communities to encourage tolerance and discuss promotion of respect for religious diversity within their communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 598,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the most recent available, more than 48 percent of the population is Christian (26 percent Protestant, 22 percent Roman Catholic, 3 percent other Christian). Other Christian groups include Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Hindus are 22 percent of the population, including the Sanathan Dharm and the Arya Dewaker. Muslims, including Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims and the World Islamic Call Society, are 14 percent. The remaining 13 percent includes Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and three Rastafarian organizations: the Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

Some Amerindian and Maroon populations, approximately 3 percent of the population, adhere to indigenous religions. Certain Amerindian groups, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (*piaiman*). Many Maroons worship nature. Those of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify as Christian often combine Christian practices with indigenous religious customs. Some Creoles in urban areas worship their ancestors through a rite called *wintie*.

There is some correlation between ethnicity and religion. The Hindustani-speaking population is primarily Hindu, while some ethnic Indians, Javanese, and Creoles practice Islam. Christianity crosses all ethnic backgrounds.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of religion, and individuals may not be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. Individuals may choose to change their religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice.

The penal code provides punishment for those who instigate hate or discrimination of persons based on religion or creed in any way; however, the law has not been enforced. Those found guilty may be sentenced to a prison term of no longer than one year and a fine of up to 25,000 Surinamese dollars (SRD) (\$3,300). In cases where an insult or act of hatred is instigated by more than one person, as part of an organization, or by a person who makes such statements habitually or as part of

work, the punishment can include imprisonment of up to two years and fines of up to SRD 50,000 (\$6,600).

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs only if they seek financial support, including stipends for clergy, from the government. To register, religious groups must supply contact information, a history of their group, and addresses for houses of worship. Most religious groups are officially registered.

The law does not permit religious instruction in public schools. The government funds teacher salaries and provides a stipend that partially covers maintenance costs to all elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. Religious groups must provide the remaining funding, which includes construction costs, funding for school furniture, supplies, and additional maintenance expenses. Religious organizations manage approximately 50 percent of primary and secondary schools in the country. The Catholic diocese, Moravian Church, and Hindu community manage the majority of private schools. Through the Ministries of Education and Finance, the government provides a fee per registered child and pays teacher salaries to the religious organizations managing these schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government continued to emphasize in government-hosted events and in the media its commitment to protecting religious freedom, including of religious minorities, and to fostering respect for religious diversity and promoting tolerance. In a *Washington Times* article, religious tolerance was commonly referred to as a national strength by the country's citizens and a frequent subject of speeches and articles from leading government, religious, and academic leaders, notably President Bouterse. The article quoted President Bouterse stating, "Diversity is normal for us; it is simply the way things are here." Bouterse also said, "We eat, work, and celebrate together. Muslims celebrate Christmas with their Christian friends, Jewish people share dinner with Muslims at the end of Ramadan, and all Surinamese traditionally celebrate the Hindu national holiday of Phagwa. We are multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and singularly peaceful." On October 1, Bouterse again noted religious freedom in his annual State of the Republic speech: "Our colorful ethnically and religiously structured society ... live peacefully together and make our country an example ... The World Justice Project states that

Suriname ... is also prominently mentioned as a country where religious freedoms are largely recognized.”

Government officials continued to raise these themes at the highest levels, including during government events celebrating the country’s various national heritage days. The president, vice president, and minister of home affairs, whose portfolio includes religion, publicly emphasized the government’s support for religious freedom and tolerance during different events throughout the year. President Bouterse reiterated the country’s commitment to religious plurality, freedom, and tolerance in a speech during a farewell event for the U.S. Ambassador.

All schools, including public schools, celebrated various religious holidays that are also national holidays, including Christmas, Easter, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, and Phagwa, but the government continued to ban public schools from allowing prayer groups during breaks. Schools managed by religious groups included religious instruction in the curriculum. All students attending schools run by religious groups were required to take part in religious instruction, regardless of their religious background. Parents were not permitted to homeschool children for religious reasons.

According to the Federal Institute for Special Education in Suriname, the government continued to pay wages for teachers managed by religious organizations; however, its other subsidies for operational expenses of these schools were either late or not paid. To cover the budgetary shortfall, all schools managed by religious organizations introduced a school fee for the 2018-19 school year. Starting with the 2018-19 school year, religious primary school tuition cost approximately SRD 250 (\$33) per year, while public primary-level education cost approximately SRD 35 (\$5). At the lower secondary level (ages 12-16), tuition at private religious schools cost SRD 275 (\$37), compared with SRD 70 (\$9) per year at public schools. Religious organizations did not run manage higher secondary schools (ages 16-19).

The armed forces continued to maintain a staff chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel.

On January 23, the government cosponsored a seminar in honor of World Religion Day, focusing on the principles guiding religious freedom and tolerance in the country to resolve other societal issues such as domestic violence, sexual violence, child neglect, and poverty.

Minister of Home Affairs Mike Noersalim issued statements on behalf of the government in honor of World Prayer Day in March and throughout the year ahead of different religious holidays such as Phagwa, Divali, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas. The statements emphasized the importance of religious harmony for a prosperous society.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

IRIS continued its efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and freedom in the country. IRIS members met monthly to discuss interfaith activities as well as the impact of different government policies on society. IRIS also collaborated with other nonmember religious organizations on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In October, as part of an interreligious effort to promote respect for the country's religious diversity, IRIS, the CCK, and various tribal leaders and dignitaries took part in a conference hosted by the SIV on the protection of the jaguar in the country.

Islamic associations issued condemnations in response to a terror threat posted on Facebook in May in the name of ISIS. The Suriname Muslim Association denounced the threat and called on persons not to “lose the loving bond” and respect for each other's religion and ethnicity. The Suriname Muslim Federation called for the continuation of the religious, social, economic, and political cooperation in peace and harmony. The Madjlies Moesliemien Suriname, the overarching body of Muslim organizations in the country, called on persons of all faiths, and those who do not practice any faith, to continue to live in solidarity, cooperation, and harmony based on universal norms of respect and brotherhood.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to highlight US policy concerning the importance of protection of religious freedom in meetings with government officials.

The Ambassador wrote an op-ed in a local newspaper in January in honor of Religious Freedom Day on the importance of religious freedom for democracies. On November 1, the embassy cohosted a movie night to commemorate the signing of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The Cultural Centre Suriname (CCS) broadcast the movie *The Shack*. A senior embassy official delivered remarks at the event, linking U.S. government support for religious freedom with

themes from the movie, including tolerance for religious views and the importance of resisting inclinations to pass judgments.

Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian communities to encourage tolerance and to discuss promotion of respect for religious diversity.